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Korean Americans in U.S. Race Relations after the 1992 Los Angeles Riots

Min Hyoung Song, *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 340 pages.

Nadia Y. Kim, *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to LA*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008, 328 pages.

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The 1992 Los Angeles riots may arguably be the turn-of-the-twentieth-century incident in US history that garnered the biggest public attention in South Korea. Headed by major newspapers and broadcasts, the Korean reportage on the LA riots brought to light the intimate connection between the two countries as Koreans in South Korea worried about the safety and welfare of their family and relatives in the U.S. Min Hyoung Song's *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots* and Nadia Y. Kim's *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to LA*, two recent books born out of enduring critical engagement with the 1992 LA riots and their repercussions, provide an apt occasion for revisiting the social and cultural significance of

the LA riots and for examining the transnational circulation of ideas of race mediated by such events.

Describing the LA riots as “a cultural–literary event,” in excess of just “a historical event,” Song reads an array of literary texts and films—ranging from texts that immediately relate to the LA riots, such as Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight: Log Angeles, 1992*, to texts whose connection has to be more subtly drawn out, such as Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles*—to draw out the social forces that converged into the riots and to show the cultural imaginary that sprung from the same events.¹⁾ His attention to “the presence of the *strange*”—his name for “the bearers of a materiality that demands narrative invention”—in the texts he analyzes both exposes a post–civil rights, neoconservative narrative of “national decline,” which bemoans the passing of a homogenous national identity, and gestures toward the critical need of constructing a counternarrative.²⁾ By keeping his focus adamantly local, Song succeeds in showing the seminal place of the LA riots in post–1965 social and cultural narratives of race relations.

While the ramifications of the LA riots Song elucidates are national in scope, his study particularly delves into the story of Korean Americans. Korean Americans received media spotlight for the first time in 1992 as the media sensationalized the conflict between Korean small business owners and their black clientele in South Central Los Angeles. Korean Americans became, in Song’s words, “a spectacle without precedent” as the larger social and economic questions that fueled the riots were displaced into a narrative of Korean racism toward blacks and black criminality.³⁾ Song’s engagement with Dai Sil

1) Song, *Strange Future*, 3.

2) *Ibid.*, 3, 212–213.

Kim-Gibson's documentary, *Sa-I-Gu: From Korean Women's Perspective* in Chapter 4 and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* in Chapter 5 is an attempt to find and explore a Korean American perspective in what Song himself calls "a historically overdetermined event."⁴⁾ Drawing on theories of racial melancholia and loss, Song illuminates the unacknowledged injuries and unarticulated grief that remain in the Korean American community after the LA riots in his reading of *Sa-I-Gu*. The evocation of a "diasporic future" through a reading of *Native Speaker* in the last chapter sharply draws attention to the limits of both the nation-state and an ethnic diaspora as its alternative.⁵⁾

Song's articulation of the Korean American trauma in the book takes place side by side his limning of another compelling figure of injury: "the black body in pain."⁶⁾ While it centrally appears in Chapter 2 when Song discusses the beating of Rodney King, the figure of "the black body in pain" permeates his narrative. From the history of Southern California's suburbanization in Chapter 1 to the spectacle of black subordination so viscerally recorded in the Rodney King videotape in Chapter 2, and even in Anna Deavere Smith's enactment of a multicultural crew in her one-woman play in Chapter 3, the figure of black injury forms a consistent thread of inquiry in Song's book. In a way, *Strange Future* can be characterized as a careful orchestration of Korean American and black injuries to show both minority groups caught in a web of social forces. This, of course, is not to say that Song presents the injuries of Korean Americans as equivalent to, or even comparable to, those of blacks.

3) Ibid., 11.

4) Ibid., 12.

5) Ibid., 164.

6) Ibid., 68.

In fact, the question of non-equivalence is palpable in much of his narrative, particularly when he refers to a question that Kim-Gibson received from a black man in the audience after the screening of her documentary. The man asks “why she made such a big deal about the death of a single Korean American when a day does not go by without the death of an African American.”⁷⁾ This question of whose wounds are bigger is a critical one for Song’s study as a whole. Despite the fact that he clearly refutes the reductive frame such a question assumes, Song cannot do away with the reality that compels such impossible comparisons.

Min Hyoung Song’s turn to literature and culture in analyzing the LA riots shows a deep frustration with the limits of traditional sociological models, “fixated on black-and-white racial conflict or on the desirability of an ill-defined assimilation,” to discuss the changes in race relations propelled by new immigration.⁸⁾ Nadia Kim’s *Imperial Citizens* likewise registers a discontent with traditional models of sociology that view immigration just from the perspective of the receiving country.⁹⁾ If the LA riots are at the heart of the “strange future” Song limns, they trigger Kim’s critical inquiry into Korean Americans’ perceptions of race. According to Kim, witnessing the LA riots in the media set her off in search for the causes of Korean American views of race, a search which quickly informed her of the limited ways in which existing sociological studies explain these views.¹⁰⁾

Kim’s major intervention in the field of immigrant acculturation and

7) Ibid., 163.

8) Ibid., 6.

9) Kim, *Imperial Citizens*, 2–3.

10) Ibid., 2.

assimilation is her “cross-border analysis” of Koreans’ views on race based on fieldwork in both South Korea and Los Angeles.¹¹⁾ Whereas existing sociological models subsume Korean American views on race under a model-minority discourse that anticipates an assimilation of Korean Americans as model minority into majority white norms, Kim suggests that “transnational racialization” undergirds the Korean/American views of race.¹²⁾ In line with other studies that have viewed the presence and influence of the US military in South Korea (and other parts of the Asia Pacific) as a sign of US imperialism, Kim presents the US military as the primary culprit in the spread of American racial ideologies that preach black inferiority (49–55, 37–40, 242–251).¹³⁾ Supported by “Korea’s indigenous *color-class* hierarchies” and fueled by Euro-American commodity racism, American racial ideologies racialize Koreans in South Korea even before they immigrate to the U.S. according to Kim.¹⁴⁾ This is the process of “imperial racialization” which Kim explores in Chapter 1.

The organization of *Imperial Citizens* reflects Kim’s method of transnational analysis as she devotes Chapters 2, 3 and 4 to exploring a South Korean racial discourse and presenting fieldwork in Seoul before shifting her focus to Los Angeles and first and second-generation Korean immigrants in Chapters 5 through 8.¹⁵⁾ Kim points to

11) Ibid., 3.

12) Ibid., 243.

13) Ibid., 49–55, 37–40, 242–251. Ji-Yeon Yuh’s *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2004) and Jodi Kim’s *Ends of Empire: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010) are notable examples.

14) Kim, *Imperial Citizens*, 248, 11, 36–37.

15) Kim interviewed 47 first-generation and 20 second-generation Korean

“ethnonationality” as the “key unit of Korean racial understanding,” which makes it difficult to directly translate an American understanding of race—based on a notion of “pan-nationality”—into the Korean context.¹⁶⁾ Overall, the transnational arc of Kim’s study shows how “U.S. racial/national dominance generates ideologies of U.S. groups of color and shapes immigrants’ cultural toolkits,” not just domestically but also globally.¹⁷⁾ Kim actively expands on the political scientist Claire Jean Kim’s theory of racial triangulation, which argues for the consideration of “civic ostracism” alongside a racial hierarchy in understanding US race relations, to persuasively show the continuities among Koreans’ and Korean Americans’ internalization of white superiority.¹⁸⁾ Despite notable signs of “imperial racialization” among her interviewees, Kim suggests an optimistic future in the second-generation immigrants’ critical understanding of racism and in the younger Koreans’ increasingly “diverse and complex understanding of the American racial landscape.”¹⁹⁾

Perhaps the weakest part of Kim’s transnational analysis comes up in the lack of historical evidence in her engagement with Korean racial understanding. While her argument that an indigenous color bias in Korea, which prefers white to black, tilled the ground for a quick absorption of American racial biases once they were introduced through the US military is big and bold, the evidence she provides is

immigrants in LA. She interviewed 32 Seoul residents. See appendix to *Imperial Citizens* for detailed information on methodology and interviewees, including their number and distribution along the lines of gender, age, and occupation. *Ibid.*, 255–271.

16) *Ibid.*, 23, 236.

17) *Ibid.*, 248.

18) Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 16, 247–248.

19) *Ibid.*, 240.

surprisingly slim, mainly based on observations from everyday life such as the popularity of “whitening” cosmetic products and the high sales of white-colored merchandise.²⁰⁾ Yet, Kim’s study is a seminal contribution to both the sociology of immigration and the transnational study of race, showing how the methodological biases stemming from treating the nation-state as a unit independent from global flows can be effectively questioned.²¹⁾ Together, *A Strange Future* and *Imperial Citizens* remind us that the 1992 LA riots, probably now faint in the popular memory in South Korea, remain a socially and culturally significant event, especially as South Korea becomes more multicultural in its demographics and as immigration to the U.S. continues.

20) Ibid., 27, 28–30. Kim notes a correspondence between Japanese and Korean color hierarchies in the preference for white over black. She cites the anthropologist John G. Russell’s work on the Japanese conception of race.

21) Ibid., 266.